

TIBOR REIMER*

DANIELA DEPEŠOVÁ**

Development of Soft Skills in Religious Education

Introduction

Children, nowadays, live in a different world than the previous generations. They have different experiences, unique stimuli, and they face new opportunities and challenges. The majority of them have virtual access to the world, and this allows them to explore much more than older generations. A dynamic, yet unpredictable future awaits them. Therefore, we have to shift our mindset on how to prepare children for the future.

In certain aspects, the educational system is incoherent with real life. The school environment mainly focuses on the acquisition of knowledge in the form of hard skills, while soft skills are often neglected. However, soft skills have become standard in the 21st century, and it's important to deem them a vital component of education. The school environment ought to prepare pupils for the reality, and it should provide an educational process designed to provide a full-scale development of their personality, including soft skills.

This article focuses on the development of soft skills in religious education. Religious education as a school subject is a specific space where pupils cultivate their religious literacy and have the opportunity to form their Christian and religious identity. Based off the Slovak context, in this study we analyse the importance of soft skills in schools and, at the same time, we seek effective means of their development during religious education lessons. One of the most determining aspects of this process is the teacher of the subject. Our research provides results on how teachers develop soft skills during their lessons.

* Tibor Reimer – Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5005-3942>; e-mail: Tibor.Reimer@frcth.uniba.sk

** Daniela Depešová – Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
ORCID: no data; e-mail: daniela.depesova82@gmail.com



1. Hard and soft skills in education

In the 21st century, school graduates are expected to have a completely different skillset than in the past. Comparing the 20th and 21st century, we must understand that pupils were set with what they had learned in school. These institutions had an obvious purpose in terms of the educational process. They were the only places offering books, materials and an educational environment. Nowadays, schools are just one of the ways of learning¹.

Until now, the emphasis was primarily put on the knowledge and skills of pupils, which we can refer to as “hard skills”. These “hard skills” are still of major importance in relation to being successful in life. Nonetheless, the societal and professional conditions of our modern age have shifted its focus. These factors require us to not only utilise our knowledge, but also prioritise our social and communicative abilities. Progression leads us to consider both knowledge and soft skills in order to prepare the upcoming generations for the new requirements.

Education in Slovakia is focused primarily on natural sciences and technical fields. As M. Bieliková emphasises, these areas are considered to be the most prominent ones of the 21st century in terms of prosperity in education, progress in innovation, for keeping up with the economic competitiveness, for environmental sustainability and by that, the development of society². Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the humanities and social sciences also enrich our life. Therefore, it is essential that there is a balanced representation of humanities, technical and social sciences in schools.

Apart from the conflict between the scientific, technological and socio-humanitarian fields, the educational system in Slovakia is directing away from its memorisation tradition and leaning towards learning for real-life purposes. Since 2000, claims have been recorded stating that it is not sufficient for teachers to educate children only by theoretical knowledge, and that it is essential to start developing “key competences”³. Despite the correlation between the terms “soft skills” and “key competencies”, they are neither interchangeable nor synonymous. Key competencies build on professional competence, therefore they are not considered to be specialised knowledge in the strict meaning of the word, but they enable a competent use of specialised knowledge as such. They comprise a wide range of overarching skills from the technical-cognitive field and affective components. Therefore, they find their flexible and innovative use in a variety of demanding professional circumstances, and those that possess them are more suitable for work. On the other hand, soft skills are re-

¹ I. Sotáková, M. Ganajová, M. Siváková, *Vzdelávanie v 21. storočí založené na kompetenciách*, “Pedagogická revue” 63(2016), no. 1-2, p. 47.

² M. Bieliková, *Realizácia STEM aktivít v školských výchovno-vzdelávacích zariadeniach*, “Pedagogika” 70(2020), no. 3, p. 315.

³ Ministerstvo školstva Slovenskej republiky, *Milénium: Národný program výchovy a vzdelávania v Slovenskej republike na najbližších 15 až 20 rokov*, Bratislava 2002, p. 8.

lated to human traits, abilities and personality characteristics which are necessary or beneficial for a profession involving interactions with co-workers and clients, or for work in general. They are personality traits and human characteristics that are not connected to specific professional requirements, but they rather increase effectiveness when it comes to work projects. The most common of these traits are teamwork, communication skills, organisational skills, assertiveness, flexibility and many others⁴.

The premise that a teachers educate only through theoretical knowledge no longer holds true in the 21st century⁵. The stricter the requirement for professional success, the higher the expectations become. This does not only concern knowledge, but the conative aspect as well. Real life conditions prove that education has not been paying enough attention to this part of an individual's preparation for reality, as theoretical knowledge has been of utmost priority. A fundamental change is needed. As a consequence, in the recent years, educational institutions have started focusing not only on hard skills, but also on the implementation and reinforcement of soft skills. However, it is important to establish a connection between hard and soft skills. The former of the two enables a person to perform certain work, while the latter helps with becoming successful in their job and field. According to E. Petlák, both types of skills should be a part of the educational process, mutually complementing each other. This way, they fully shape the pupils personal and educational profile in an interactive and integrative manner⁶.

1.1. Characteristics of hard and soft skills

The term hard skills encompasses all the competencies acquired through both formal education in school and non-formal education, and they are easily measurable. They are also referred to as expertise, therefore required for a certain profession or activity. Hard skills essentially combine professional knowledge and specific skills. The ways in which they are measured in the educational environment include, for example, knowledge-based tests, oral examinations etc., and they are evaluated, or classified, by marks. These determine the extent to which the pupil has met the requirements of a particular subject. From a long-term perspective, they indicate an individual's study prerequisites and future professional orientation⁷. Currently, some of the most sought after hard skills are foreign language proficiency, text-editing, various

⁴ T. Hansel, *Soft Skills – Alternative zur Fachlichkeit oder weiche Performance?*, https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2012/5294/pdf/Hansel_2011_SoftSkills_D_A.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2024).

⁵ B. Pupala et al., *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Výhodiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania*, Bratislava 2022, p. 8.

⁶ E. Petlák, *Educating pupils in soft skills*, "Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal" 12(2023), no. 1, p. 32.

⁷ I. Sotáková, M. Ganajová, M. Siváková, *Vzdelávanie v 21. storočí založené na kompetenciách*, "Pedagogická revue" 63(2016), no. 1-2, p. 49.

means of digital communication and programming languages, marketing skills, social media administration, data analysis and web analytics. Ergo, hard skills further comprise software skills necessary for tasks as programming, software solution suggestions, or to use technologies as cyber-security devices and database administration tools.

The term soft skills consists of such competencies or skills, which are not directly taught in school subjects, but are acquired during the course of life by experiences, as well as through social interactions in the family, at school, in groups etc. They are commonly referred to or considered as personality traits. Soft skills are more difficult to measure. These skills are not related to a specific aspect of a particular profession or activity, but have a significant impact on its quality⁸.

According to H. W. Jendrowiak, we can suppose that the interpretation of soft skills derives from an anthropological foundation. The differentiated anthropological perspectives result not only in distinct understanding of soft skills, but they have an actual impact on the content structure and functionality of this term⁹. Because of this, we recognize quite a lot of soft skills, and it is up to the individual's judgment which to acquire and use on daily basis. G. Dueck regards them as "intelligences" and defines methodical, social, personal and communication soft skills¹⁰.

Methodical soft skills	Social soft skills	Personal soft skills	Communication soft skills
creativity	emotional intelligence	engagement	active listening
organisational skills	intercultural competence	independence	language proficiency
perseverance	teamwork	decision-making	negotiation
flexibility	integration capability	decisiveness	persuasion
resilience	resilience	analytical thinking	assertiveness
strategic thinking	mediation	willingness to learn	enthusiasm
quick grasp	empathy	frustration tolerance	articulation
structured work	personality assessment	curiosity	interpersonal skills
diligence	collaboration	self-reflection	motivational skills
self-control	conflict resolution	development skills	
systems thinking	delegation		
entrepreneurial thinking	cultural awareness		
goal orientation			

Table 1: Soft skills (source: Dueck, 2011).

⁸ M. Martrtájová, O. Zelmanová, F. Galleé, *Mäkké zručnosti učiteľov základných a stredných škôl v kontexte kompetencií 21. storočia*, https://www2.nucem.sk/dl/4870/Mäkké%20zrucnosti%20ucitelov%20základných%20a%20stredných%20škôl_2021.pdf (Accessed on May 28, 2024).

⁹ H.-W. Jendrowiak, *Zur Dialektik von Soft Skills und fachlicher Kompetenz*, https://www.pe-docs.de/volltexte/2012/5294/pdf/Hansel_2011_SoftSkills_D_A.pdf (Last Accessed on 20 May 2024).

¹⁰ G. Dueck, *Professionelle Intelligenz: Worauf es morgen ankommt*, Köln 2011, p. 56.

1.2. Soft skills in school

The fact the educational system takes more interest in hard skills follows from the traditional role of schools as a mean of preparing pupils for the integration to the work process. The pupils' results were evaluated according to the extent of the knowledge they obtained from the subject contents, and opened the path to the work market or further education. However, if soft skills play a significant role in having a successful work life, then it is important to take the teacher profession into consideration in terms of its connection to these characteristics.

Contemporary education is starting to focus on soft skills, as they ought to become an important part of thinking and professional future. The Slovak educational system has defined its primary goal under the undergoing curricular reform, that is, the acquisition of necessary skills for life, prospective career placement and life-long learning. It is clear that many soft skills are already being fully recognised, even required in numerous professions, yet we do not comprehend the impact and importance they have for the future. They are perceived as certain personality traits, for example, the ability to organise our workflow, make decisions, and implement the findings of our self-reflection and more¹¹.

All efforts in the educational process have impact on the outset and the development of soft skills in pupils. However, the acquisition and development of soft skills cannot be framed by just a selection of subjects, or by introducing new ones. Rather, it must be a component of every teacher's work and interest, regardless of the subject, to ensure that their educational process is focused on developing and enhancing these skills. For that reason, the focus on soft skills has to be incorporated into the whole educational process, and it primarily needs appropriate and attentively selected teaching methods that would encourage pupils to apply them in various activities: ranging from classroom communication through lecture methods to different games, collective methods, project-based teaching etc.

It is the schools' and teachers' duty to ensure that the same amount of focus is placed on soft and hard skills. The way teachers implement the mentioned kinds of skills mainly depends on their non-formal creativity. It certainly can no longer be only centered on imparting and enhancing knowledge, but also, and very significantly, on the aforementioned areas. Soft skills benefit the personal development of every individual, and they provide an additional value. The important factor for teachers is that pupils obtain important knowledge and experiences, while elevating and utilize all cross-cutting soft skills in the learning process. They should provide a space for learners to observe what is happening around them, to truly evaluate the reality, to ask questions and seek adequate answers¹².

¹¹ B. Pupala et al., *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania*, Bratislava 2022, p. 12.

¹² I. Sotáková, M. Ganajová, M. Siváková, *Vzdelávanie v 21. storočí založené na kompetenciách*, "Pedagogická revue" 63(2016), no. 1-2, p. 50.

In his research, E. Petlák was investigating the opinions and stances of teachers on the question of the extent to which schools take interest in soft skills, and the way they acknowledge and implement them in their educational process. The research suggests that teachers are aware that education reaches much further than just providing knowledge. They understand the significance of problem-solving, collaboration and constructivist approaches as methods of knowledge acquisition. Nevertheless, the extent to which they intentionally feature these innovations in their lessons is questionable. Based upon the teacher's statements, Petlák concludes that they do not make use of these methods in order to enhance soft skills. Teaching professionals view them as didactic innovation of the educational process, or a "supplementary aspect of teaching" rather than essential means of developing soft skills in pupils¹³.

2. Religious education as a space for perfecting soft skills

Religious education in Slovakia has the structure of confessional religious education. It is a compulsory elective school subject in alternation with ethics. Besides the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches, schools also include the principles of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Orthodox Church, the Reformed Christian Church, and the Slovak Baptist Church.

2.1. Religious education as a mean of developing religious literacy

The main objective of the Roman Catholic religious education in Slovakia is for children to develop their religious literacy, and acquire and access their Christian and religious identity. We define religious literacy as a complex ability to honour their religiousness and other ideologies. This literacy is further expanded through obtained religious competencies. Religious education simultaneously develops the ethical-value dimension of pupils, a feature it shares with ethics, and thus contributes to the integral education in school education¹⁴.

The difference between competency-oriented and traditional teaching lies in the emphasis of abilities that pupils acquire by the end of their school education. Therefore, the educational outcomes reflected in the shape of gained religious competencies are determinant. If we deem teaching in schools to be an educational process oriented towards the acquisition and development of competencies, we can interpret religious education as the development of religious competency. Religious competencies are abilities that enable pupils to understand and express Christianity adequately, and live according to their faith¹⁵.

¹³ E. Petlák, *Educating pupils in soft skills*, "Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal" 12(2023), no. 1, p. 34-35.

¹⁴ *Vzdelávacie štandardy. Vzdelávacia oblasť Človek a spoločnosť. Náboženská výchova/náboženstvo Rímskokatolíckej cirkvi v Slovenskej republike*, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11827_nabozenska-vychova_nabozenstvo-rimskokatolickej-cirkvi.pdf (Accessed on May 23, 2024).

¹⁵ T. Reimer, *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*, Bratislava 2020, p. 139.

Religious education in schools is a complex, systematic and dynamic educational process. It begins with the religious understanding of reality: children are perceptive of the world and religious phenomena. Perception is the foundation of all religious knowledge. It is then followed by understanding: pupils get familiarised with the core teaching of Catholicism, take on important terminology and texts, religious tradition, as well as the historical importance of the Church. Pupils attribute meaning and significance to the accessed knowledge through understanding, and they gain a sense of the connection between religious knowledge and their life. Another of the developed competencies is religious communication: children learn to ask questions and construct arguments in a theological manner, expand their religious repertoire, and express their religiousness and worldview. Religious judgment and decision-making is important; experiences and knowledge influence pupils to base their opinions on reason and critical-thinking, and make their own decisions. The last competency is the ability to employ and follow: children learn to behave responsibly in regards to themselves and others. Education on religion encourages pupils to refrain from passivity, and, rather, engage in social, societal and religious life to discover their own manner of following Jesus¹⁶.

2.2. Development of soft skills in religious education

Religious education is a significant space for pupils' personal development, time management and conflict resolution in school, and the development of soft skills that can be beneficial in their personal and professional life. As stated by Petlák, the acquisition of soft skills in education is accomplished mainly through classroom communication, argumentation, emotional intelligence and public speaking. In addition, practicing teamwork and appropriate leadership encourages assertive behavior and conflict resolution. This thereby enhances pupils' critical thinking and ability to manage information¹⁷.

In conformity with the definition of soft skills, we will attempt to define specific areas in which religious education as a subject is instrumental, providing a space for their integral personal development.

- **Development of communication skills:** the school subject Roman Catholic religious education consists of discussions, collaborative work and projects that aid the development of communication skills. Pupils learn to communicate their ideas and opinions clearly and effectively as well as to listen and react to others. They also learn to listen to and reflect on others' opinions and beliefs. This can reinforce the ability to empathise and expand their worldview. Religious education can present an opportunity to discuss conflicts and find appropriate and assertive resolutions. This way, children can learn how to constructively resolve conflicts and find common solutions.

¹⁶ B. Pupala et al., *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania*, Bratislava 2022, p. 110.

¹⁷ E. Petlák, *Educating pupils in soft skills*, "Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal" 12(2023), no. 1, p. 34-35.

- **Teamwork and leadership skills:** assigning projects and activities that require collaboration and communication in a group can help pupils develop an ability to work in a team. This skill will be necessary in their future work environment. They can also use it within the family; a functional family environment requires teamwork. What's more, children can get involved in leading or organizing religious activities and projects, which can strengthen their skill to lead and take initiative.
- **Responsibility in action and moral decision-making:** religious education lessons represent a space for pupils to theologise, deal with moral questions and discuss how those impact their personal life, future career and future family. These conversations are aimed to reinforce responsible behaviours and the orientation towards higher spiritual Christian values.
- **Critical thinking:** pupils can analyse religious texts, traditions and practices, and to seek answers to existential questions. This process fosters the development of critical thinking and analysis skills. At the same time, conversations about personal ideologies can contribute to the children's understanding their own "self" and their role in the world. Such a process of self-awareness is a vital aspect of their development.
- **Tolerance, respect, and altruism:** discovering the diversity of religious traditions and cultures, and obtaining general knowledge about ecumenism can fortify tolerance and respect towards different views and spiritual beliefs. Religious education may set a foundation for the sense of justice in pupils, and motivate them to advocate for social equity worldwide. Conversations about ethical principles and spiritual values can encourage the pupils to partake in volunteering and charity-related initiatives. Meanwhile, religious education can highlight children's environment and nature related responsibility, so they can have a hand in creating a healthier environment to live in.
- **Creativity and innovation:** Religious education can represent an opportunity to support innovative approaches and creativity. The teacher encourages pupils to explore new options on how to convey their faith and religious values using creative projects from different types of art (literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, cinematography, photography, theatre etc.)
- **Spiritual development and the search for purpose in life:** religious education can serve as a mean of spiritual growth: for finding perseverance, inner peace and purpose in life, creating a foundation for the understanding of true personal happiness.

Religious education lessons in Slovakia represent a space in which children expand their religious literacy, and can prove to be an essential means of developing soft skills. Nonetheless, this development through innovative didactic methods is not just a supplementary or additional feature of the subject, but rather an essential and integral complement.

3. Insight of religious education teachers on the development of soft skills

If soft skills have great impact on success in both personal and professional life, then it is important to take the persona of a teacher into account. That is to say, if a teacher did not possess communication skills, they would be unable to teach them to the pupils. A teacher without organisational skills would hardly educate others on identification and differentiation of important and unimportant matters. Hence, teachers have a crucial role in the development of children's soft skills.

With interest in Slovak religious teachers' innovative educational methods, we conducted a questionnaire-based investigation, in which we analyse their stances on the quality of their teaching process and the skills they nurture. The questionnaire counts with 168 teachers' responses from the whole country. We study how teachers evaluate themselves in terms of their overall position on teaching, as their overview of the events in the classroom and time management, the clarity of rules and transparent communication, pupil orientation, and also the educational approach of the teacher. Then we direct our attention to the structure and execution of the teaching process, for example, classroom environment and time management, establishing connections between school subjects, and highlighting the relevance of the covered topic. Aside from that, we analyse the teachers' ability to support pupils in independent learning, implement cooperation and provide feedback. Lastly, we pay attention to the course of their lessons as such, and how they plan and assess the outcomes of the teaching process.

3.1. Analysis of the self-assessment of religious education teachers' soft skills

In the framework of this research we defined four soft skills that determine the development of these skills in religious education lessons. The selected soft skills are based on G Dueck's categorisation: organisational skills (methodological skills), teamwork (social skills), independence (personal skills) and articulation (communication skills)¹⁸. These competencies partially based off of the skills of a teacher, such as communication or organisational competency, or other skills they develop in children through the educational process, including how they create a cooperative and individual learning environment.

Organisational skills

Effective classroom organization ensures the effectiveness of the educational process, providing a vital factor for successful learning. Organisational skills imply that a teacher is competent to structure the learning process clearly from the point of view of contents and order, which leads to high effectiveness and increases the concentration of pupils. This ability makes a well-thought-out, prepared and purposefully segmented learning process possible, providing

¹⁸ G. Dueck, *Professionelle Intelligenz: Worauf es morgen ankommt*, Köln 2011, p. 56.

steadiness, continuity, and structure. Effective teaching management suggests that the teacher is aware of what occurs in this sense and to what extent they are conscious of the disengaged and problematic pupils.

The answers show that religious education teachers possess a fairly high level of effective classroom management (3,4). It is also the highest measured score of the studied soft skills. Teachers exhibit a high proficiency in the management and organisation of the learning process. The respondents are attentive to the events in the classroom and they voice the topic of the lesson with clarity. In a somewhat lower rate, they can sense if a pupil runs into difficulties when dealing with a task, or identify their current state. Still, results show that teachers are capable of determining the individual competency level of pupils, and respond to it accordingly. A high score in classroom organisation skills is an important prerequisite for effective learning.

	Score	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
Effective classroom management	3,4					
I familiarise the pupils with the topic of the lesson before starting	3,6	0	4 (2,4%)	51 (30,7%)	111 (66,9%)	2
I acknowledge when a pupil does not follow the course of the lesson	3,7	1 (0,6%)	0	53 (32,3%)	110 (67,1%)	4
I acknowledge when a pupil did not understand something correctly	3,3	0	11 (6,6%)	87 (52,1%)	69 (41,3%)	1
I am aware of the tasks pupils struggle with	3,3	1 (0,6%)	14 (8,4%)	88 (53%)	63 (38%)	2
Mistakes indicate the current level of a pupils' learning	3,2	3 (1,8%)	21 (12,7%)	86 (52,1%)	55 (33,3%)	3
I ensure that pupils understand and build on the topic of the lesson systematically	3,3	0	14 (8,4%)	80 (48,2%)	72 (43,4%)	2

Table 2: Effective classroom management (researchers' source, 2024).

Teamwork

Collaboration and cooperative learning are becoming prominent terminology in contemporary education because if pupils get a sense of teamwork in school, they will be able to implement it in their future professions. The need for collaboration reflects real life, which is why teachers seek measures to change the educational system. Teamwork requires pupils to adopt knowledge in collaboration and from one another in a methodologically ordered process. The teacher provides a space for cooperative learning and cooperation. That implies that cooperative work methods are a component of the everyday learning routine. Pupils support each other during the cooperative learning methods, they assume responsibility for the collaborative learning process and enrich these methods by employing their competencies. Knowing how to implement cooperative learning processes is a key skill for teachers that emphasises the pupils' work

to achieve a common result, and it is demonstrated through carrying out project-based learning and underlining the mutual support among children.

Religious education teachers match their extent of implementing cooperative processes with a 3,1 score. In this case, teachers are conscious of the issues regarding cooperation implementation in the classroom. The implementation of project-based learning ranks among classroom aspects with the lowest score (2,8), which is considered to be one of the most crucial means of soft skill development. While the teachers highlight the significance of mutual support and collaboration in pupils (3,6), they do not make use of the didactic potential of cooperative learning. As a result, the development of teamwork and collaborative learning of pupils is not reinforced from the side of the teacher.

	Score	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
Implementation of cooperative learning	3,1					
I provide pupils with the project-based learning opportunities	2,8	12 (7,3)	54 (32,7%)	61 (37%)	38 (23%)	3
I emphasise the importance of mutual support in the classroom	3,6	1 (0,6%)	4 (2,4%)	49 (29,5%)	112 (67,5%)	2
I provide educational spaces designed for teamwork	3,3	0	22 (13,2%)	70 (41,9%)	76 (44,9%)	0
I encourage pupils to identify ways in which they learn collaboratively	2,8	7 (4,2%)	48 (28,9%)	77 (46,4%)	34 (20,5%)	2
I allow pupils to evaluate each other's work	2,9	11 (6,7%)	38 (23%)	77 (46,7%)	39 (23,6%)	3

Table 3: Implementation of cooperative teaching (researchers' source, 2024).

Independence

Independent learning is another important component of the educational process that allows pupils to learn individually in conformity with their age and development. By so doing, they acquire skills that allow them to actively structure their intellect, overcome challenges, and reach their goals. Encouraging this kind of independence calls for giving pupils the freedom to select tasks or topics and work on them independently, to be able to plan, regulate, and fulfill the objectives, contents, and course of their personal learning process. This teaching method enables autodidactic learning, and pupils gradually learn to identify what they need to learn or revise to keep up with the content.

According to the responses, the score of encouraging independent learning is 2,9. Religious education teachers do not seem to attend to pupils' independent learning methods and only support autodidactic learning in a limited manner. Although teachers regard it as essential that pupils assume responsibility for their education (3,4), they are unable to reflect it on the particular learning

processes (2,6). They create differentiated approaches for pupils to acquire knowledge and skills inadequately. Individual selection of learning tasks obtained a similarly low score (2,7). This implies that teachers prefer not to grant the opportunity for children to take more responsibility when it comes to planning and accomplishing the goals and contents of their learning processes. As a result, this approach does not nurture successful competence acquisition.

	Score	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
Encouragement of independence	2,9					
I assign tasks that allow pupils can work on in an almost entirely independent manner	2,6	7 (4,2%)	65 (39,2%)	75 (45,2%)	19 (11,4%)	2
I consider that pupils assuming responsibility for their learning is important	3,4	1 (0,6%)	13 (7,8%)	72 (43,4%)	80 (48,2%)	2
I attend to pupils' independent management of learning activity and its results	2,7	7 (4,3%)	52 (31,9%)	79 (48,5%)	25 (15,3%)	5
I contribute to pupils having access to various learning methods	3,3	1 (0,6%)	13 (7,8%)	92 (55,4%)	60 (36,1%)	2
I encourage pupils to experiment with their own learning methods	3,0	3 (1,8%)	33 (20,2%)	85 (51,5%)	43 (26,4%)	5
I allow pupils to work independently on tasks of their own choice	2,7	10 (6,1%)	59 (35,8%)	63 (37,6%)	34 (20,6%)	3

Table 4: Encouragement of pupils' independence (researchers' source, 2024).

Communication

Communication is a valuable skill that both teachers and pupils should master. The educational process provides children with an opportunity to practice considered and differentiated use of language, to select standardised and creative expressions, and to reflect on the meaning and impact of language in the appropriate context. Language skills help pupils practice argumentation and form a part of society. When assessing effective communication skills, we focused on the respondents' perception of their abilities to communicate clearly and in a captivating manner, to explain things and achieve a more effective teaching process. The teacher adopts the position of a communication role model.

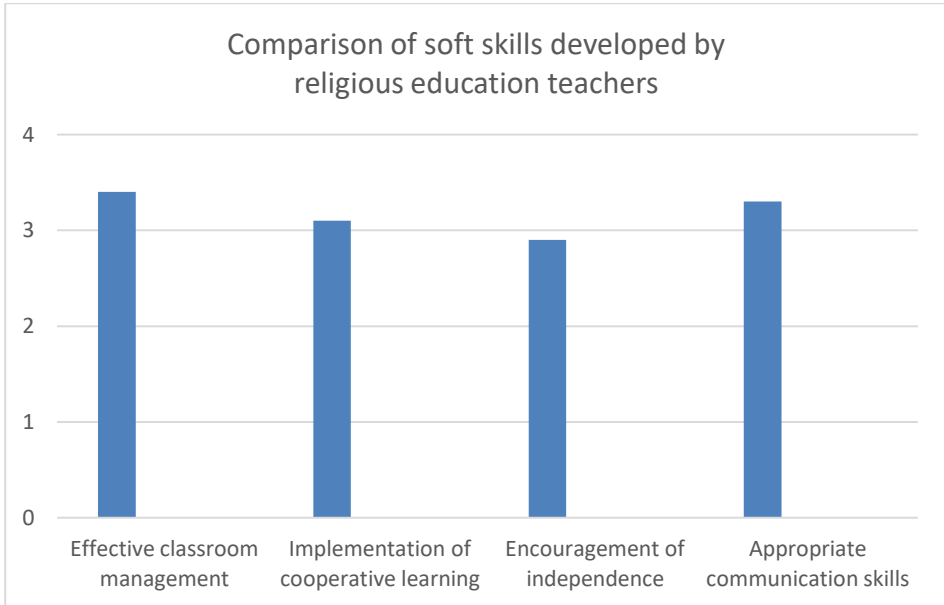
Religious education teachers assigned a score of 3,3 to communication skills. This represents the second highest score after effective classroom management. Teachers regard themselves capable of communicating, formulating ideas intelligibly, and offering well-put explanations on the curriculum. However, according to the data, it is important to consider that one fifth of teachers distrust their capability of providing pupils with extensive knowledge (20,3%). In spite of these doubts, they demonstrate a strong diligence to make religious education lessons creative and intriguing (95,2%).

	Score	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
Appropriate communication skills	3,3					
I am able to explain things well	3,2	3 (1,8%)	8 (4,8%)	106 (63,5%)	50 (29,9%)	1
I am able to provide pupils with extensive knowledge	2,9	3 (1,8%)	31 (18,5%)	121 (72%)	13 (7,7%)	0
I formulate ideas clearly in the classroom	3,5	1 (0,6%)	4 (2,4%)	78 (47,3%)	82 (49,7%)	3
I strive to make my lessons engaging	3,5	1 (0,6%)	7 (4,2%)	70 (41,9%)	89 (53,3%)	1

Graph 1: Appropriate communication skills (researchers’ source, 2024).

3.2. Analysis of results and proposal of measures

By conducting a questionnaire directed toward teachers, we aimed to study the extent of soft skills development during religious education lessons. We analysed the four selected soft skills based on the answers of our respondents: organisational skills and classroom management, encouraging teamwork and cooperative learning, the independence of pupils, and communication skills.



Graph 2: Comparison of soft skills (researcher’s source, 2024).

The participants’ inputs demonstrate a somewhat similar view on the development of soft skills during religious education lessons. Based on the results, we can state that teachers have more developed effective management

and communication skills, while lacking in the implementation of cooperative and independent teaching methods. Teachers can significantly individualise the level of pupils' learning and respond to it adequately. At the same time, they are capable of communicating, formulating ideas intelligibly, and offering clear delivery of the subject curriculum.

On the contrary, religious education teachers have difficulties with encouraging collaboration as well as cooperative learning and, above all, project-based learning. The lowest score belongs to the encouragement of independent learning. It reveals that teachers rarely attend to alternative options for pupils to acquire competence individually and assume responsibility for their learning process. A strong presence of effective learning process management and efficient communication facilitates the educational process, nevertheless, a lower degree of development of children's teamwork and independence acts as an obstacle for efficient learning.

We find the teachers' competency to lead and manage the teaching process during religious education lessons to be a positive point. Effective management goes beyond just maintaining order in the classroom, as it comprises the creation of a positive learning atmosphere, assessment of learning objectives, and evaluation of learning effectiveness. Leading and managing the educational process can create optimal teaching conditions. Just as importantly, a professional with appropriate leadership skills will be able to aid their pupils adopt the skill of distinguishing more pressing matters from those of less importance.

Mutual tolerance and respect toward pupils' individual views and religious beliefs can foster a positive classroom environment during religious education lessons. Acceptance may serve as a key to spark motivation, and it supports the educational process.

Another significant revelation is that religious education teachers consider themselves capable of communicating, formulating ideas intelligibly, and offering well-put explanations of the subject curriculum. Argumentation competency also belongs to communication skills. However, schools function on a frontal approach to lectures, known also as a "direct instruction" teaching strategy, which does not allow for sufficient development of communication skills. In contrast, pupils consider having conversations about the covered topic to be an undervalued teaching method¹⁹. Therefore, the challenge for teachers, including those of religious education, is to encourage pupils to use various communication and argumentation techniques, and to develop oral and written skills in a structured and appropriate manner.

Active listening on the part of the teacher is an important prerequisite for effective communication. There is no effective communication without pupils practicing active listening. Religious education teachers must truly be interested

¹⁹ *Komunikačné zručnosti*, <https://analyza.todarozum.sk/docs/342391002ks0a/> (Accessed May 26, 2024).

in pupils' interpretations and must listen to their points of view. That is, to distance themselves from the role of a specialist and take on the duty of a perceptive observer, who provides a space for pupils to voice their theological views. This provides a big opportunity to introduce authentic theological dialogues and encourage children to theologise during religious education lessons²⁰.

Religious education teachers expressed a lower ability to implement teamwork and cooperative teaching. The score of 3,1 confirms the fact that teachers do not make good use of cooperative learning's didactic potential, and only focus on teamwork and collaborative learning to a lesser extent. It is affirmed by E. Petlák's research, in which he concludes that teachers perceive innovative approaches, such as project-based learning, more as a supplement to education rather than a fundamental prerequisite for developing soft skills²¹.

This result requires teachers to make an actual advance towards meaningful utilization of cooperative teaching in religious education lessons, for example by involving pupils in leading or organizing religious activities and projects. Encouraging collaboration and implementing cooperative teaching methods improve the children's performance, strategic thinking, vocabulary, and coherent use of language. At the same time, they boost their motivation to learn and shape their social skills. This way, collaboration in religious education classes can positively impact their confidence and ability to deal with mental problems, it can reduce stress levels and improve their relationship with school and teachers²².

According to the analysed responses, the skill with the lowest score (2,9) belongs to the teachers' ability to encourage independent learning. Teachers do not seem to attend to pupils' independent learning methods or they do so in a limited manner during religious education lessons. It is precisely the personalised education that empowers the pupils to assume responsibility for their learning and allows them to gain experience based on their judgment. It's important for religious education to become a space for independent knowledge acquisition. This skill is related to pupils' creativity and innovation, meanwhile they are invited to individually explore new and personalised options for how to convey their faith and religious values. Similarly, it is a way of accessing spiritual development and finding purpose in life, both of which create a solid foundation for the understanding of true personal happiness.

Religious education teachers ought to understand that they assume the role of a guide and advisor in the world of personalised education. This subject provides a space for independent learning through specific activities, such as

²⁰ F. Kraft, *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern und Jugendlichen. Eine didaktische Perspektive*, "Loccumer Pelikan" 2012, no. 4, p. 154.

²¹ E. Petlák, *Educating pupils in soft skills*, "Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal" 12(2023), no. 1, p. 34-35.

²² M. Ondrušová, A. Šurinová, *Kooperatívne techniky na podporu učenia sa žiakov*, Bratislava 2020, p. 17.

volunteering or individual charity or environmental-related initiatives. The ability of children to decide independently provides the opportunity for development according to their needs and abilities²³.

Conclusion

School as an institution is designed to prepare pupils for real life, so the educational process must also be focused on soft skill development. The objective of religious education is to develop religious competencies, meaning that this school subject offers valuable space for pupils' personal development, as well as for perfecting their soft skills.

An important feature of developing soft skills in religious education is the teacher that acts like a key persona of this process. Teachers are aware that education reaches much further than just providing knowledge. It strengthens skills such as teamwork, communication, independence, critical thinking, creativity, and organisational skills. Our research concludes that teachers have well-developed methodical and communication skills, while the ability to nurture cooperative and independent learning is lacking in this manner. For that matter, they face the challenge of implementing social and personal soft skills in their teaching process. They are compelled to make an actual advance towards meaningful utilisation of cooperative teaching in religious education by involving pupils in the organisation of religious activities and projects, volunteering, or individual charity or environmental-related initiatives.

* * *

Summary

This article studies the development of soft skills in religious education lessons in Slovakia. At present, the educational system focuses on the acquisition of knowledge in the form of hard skills instead of developing soft skills. However, soft skills are life necessities in the 21st century. Religious education, which is currently defined as the development of religious literacy, represents a meaningful space for the personal development of pupils, and the development of soft skills, which can be beneficial for their personal and professional life. According to research among religious education teachers, we can affirm that soft skills are included in the lessons. Nevertheless, while teachers have more developed effective management and communication skills, they lack the ability to support cooperative and independent learning.

Keywords: soft skills, school, religious education, teacher.

²³ A. Pávová, D. Váňová, *Metódy a techniky personalizovaného vyučovania*, Bratislava 2020, p. 4.

Bibliography

- Bieliková M., *Realizácia STEM aktivít v školských výchovno-vzdelávacích zariadeniach*, "Pedagogika" 70(2020), no. 3, p. 314-332.
- Dueck G., *Professionelle Intelligenz: Worauf es morgen ankommt*, Köln 2011.
- Hansel T., *Soft Skills – Alternative zur Fachlichkeit oder weiche Performance?* https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2012/5294/pdf/Hansel_2011_SoftSkills_D_A.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2024).
- Jendrowiak H.-W., *Zur Dialektik von Soft Skills und fachlicher Kompetenz*, https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2012/5294/pdf/Hansel_2011_SoftSkills_D_A.pdf (Accessed May 20, 2024).
- Komunikačné zručnosti*, <https://analyza.todarozum.sk/docs/342391002ks0a/> (Accessed May 26, 2024).
- Kraft F., *Theologische Gespräche mit Kindern und Jugendlichen. Eine didaktische Perspektive*, "Loccumer Pelikan" (2012), no. 4, p. 153-157.
- Marttrajová M., Zelmanová O., Galleé F., *Mäkké zručnosti učiteľov základných a stredných škôl v kontexte kompetencií 21. storočia*, https://www2.nucem.sk/dl/4870/Mäkké%20zrucnosti%20ucitelov%20základných%20a%20stredných%20škôl_2021.pdf (Accessed May 28, 2024).
- Ministerstvo školstva Slovenskej republiky, *Milénium: Národný program výchovy a vzdelávania v Slovenskej republike na najbližších 15 až 20 rokov*, Bratislava 2002.
- Ondrušová M., Šurinová A., *Kooperatívne techniky na podporu učenia sa žiakov*, Bratislava 2020.
- Pávoová A., D. Váňová, *Metódy a techniky personalizovaného vyučovania*, Bratislava 2020.
- Petlák E., *Educating pupils in soft skills*, "Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal" 12(2023), no. 1, p. 31-39.
- Pupala B. et al., *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania*, Bratislava 2022.
- Reimer T., *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*, Bratislava 2020.
- Sotáková I., Ganajová M., Siváková M., *Vzdelávanie v 21. storočí založené na kompetenciách*, "Pedagogická revue" 63(2016), no. 1-2, p. 43-70.
- Vzdelávacie štandardy. Vzdelávacia oblasť Človek a spoločnosť. Náboženská výchova/náboženstvo Rímskokatolíckej cirkvi v Slovenskej republike*, https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/11827_nabozenska-vychova_nabozenstvo-rimskokatolickej-cirkvi.pdf (Accessed May 23, 2024).